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## Thousands of Turks defy Erdogan's call for end to protest

By Nick Tattersall

6/8/2013

Thousands of Turks dug in on Saturday for a weekend of anti-government demonstrations despite Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's demand for an immediate end to protests that have spawned the most violent riots of his decade in power.

In central Istanbul's Taksim Square, where riot police backed by helicopters and armored vehicles first clashed with protesters a week ago, activists spent the night in a makeshift protest camp, sleeping in tents and vandalized buses, or wrapped in blankets under plane trees.

Police fired teargas and water cannon on protesters in the working class Gazi neighborhood of Istanbul, which saw heavy clashes with police in the 1990s, but the situation was quieter in the capital Ankara, where a few dozen demonstrators remained in tents in a central park.

In a rare show of unity, fans from Istanbul's three main football clubs Besiktas, Galatasaray and Fenerbahce, who have been heavily involved in some of the protests, plan simultaneous marches on Taksim later on Saturday.

What began as a campaign against the redevelopment of Gezi Park in a corner of Istanbul's Taksim Square spiraled into an unprecedented display of public anger over the perceived authoritarianism of Erdogan and his Islamist-rooted AK Party.

Riot police have clashed with groups of protesters night after night in cities across the country, leaving three dead and close to 5,000 injured, according to medics.

Erdogan has given no indication of plans to remove tents in Taksim, around which protesters have built barricades of paving stones and corrugated iron, clogging part of central Istanbul.

"Let them attack, they can't stop us," a member of the Turkish Communist Party shouted through loudspeakers to a cheering crowd from on top of a white van in the square.

Taksim is lined by luxury hotels that should be doing a roaring trade as the summer season starts in one of the world's most-visited cities. But a forced eviction might trigger a repeat of the clashes seen earlier in the week.

## ANGER BOILS OVER

The gatherings mark a challenge to a leader whose authority is built on three successive election victories and Erdogan takes the protests as a personal affront.

Sources close to the AK Party that Erdogan founded in 2001 suggest a sense of siege within the leadership, with influential if disparate forces worried about the extent of his power.

Citing a party source, the Radikal newspaper said an AK Party executive meeting on Saturday may discuss the possibility of calling early elections, although it could also change party rules to enable Erdogan to seek a fourth term as prime minister rather than running for the presidency.

The party has made no public statement on the agenda.

Erdogan has made clear he has no intention of stepping aside - pointing to the AK Party's 50 percent of the vote in the last election - and has no clear rivals inside the party or outside.

He has enacted many democratic reforms, taming a military that toppled four governments in four decades, starting entry talks with the European Union and forging peace talks with Kurdish rebels to end a three-decade-old war.

But in recent years, critics say his style, always forceful and emotional, has become authoritarian.

Media has come under pressure, opponents have been arrested over alleged coup plots, and moves such as restrictions on alcohol sales have unsettled secular middle-class Turks who are sensitive to any encroachment of religion on their daily lives.

"These protests are partly a result of his success in economic and social transformation. There's a new generation who doesn't want to be bullied by the prime minister and who is afraid their lifestyle is in danger," said Joost Lagendijk, a former European parliamentarian and Istanbul-based academic.